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CERTAIN LITERARY ASPECTS OF POE

To many readers Poe's imaginative works are chiefly interesting, not for what they are intrinsically, but for the vivid light which they indirectly throw on his strange and fascinating personality. With that class it is not so much the decorative and versatile prose-writer who attracts,—not so much the poet with his vision of regions lying beyond space and time,—not so much the sensitive and fastidious artist, in short, as the naked, detached man. They look to his verses and tales for the true explanation of all the unhappy vicissitudes of his life,—for a full revelation of the qualities which, by causing him to stand entirely apart from his own kind, made those vicissitudes inevitable.

Does not the same burning desire to pluck out the heart of a mystery animate the greater number of persons who read the poems of Byron and Shelley? Is this the attitude of many who peruse the poems of Wordsworth and Tennyson? Unconsciously, as it were, the mind in brooding over the spirit of *Childe Harold* and *Prometheus Unbound*, speculates as to the characters of the men to whom the world owes those strange creations. Are the thoughts of many inquisitive about the idiosyncrasies of the authors of *In Memoriam* and *The Excursion* in reading those poems? The poems are of supreme interest,—their paternity, in comparison, is of none. The reason is obvious,—as men, Tennyson and Wordsworth appeal to curiosity far less than Shelley or Byron, because, great as they were, they were nevertheless coldly and sternly conventional and normal. The impersonality of their poems naturally tends to excite no interest in their own personalities.

This does not reflect the emotion of most readers in their attitude towards Byron, Shelley, and Poe. Consummate literary artists as they were, they were more fascinating in their characters as poets, because endowed with an originality of personality, perverted it may be, to which Wordsworth and Tennyson, fortunately for their own happiness, could advance no pretension. It would be difficult to conceive of a more radical antithesis than

that presented in comparing the chequered, tumultuous existence of the three poets of erratic impulse, on the one hand, and the smooth, undeviating, contemplative existence of the two sober and judicious laureates, on the other. The last scenes in the lives of Poe, Shelley, and Byron, which offer a melancholy contrast to the serene closing hours of Wordsworth and Tennyson, reflected with absolute fidelity the disordered mutations in the careers of the restless and passionate trio.

The curious interest felt by so many readers in the idiosyncrasies of Shelley, Byron, and Poe is unequally gratified by the perusal of their poems. Poe, as we know, did not lack the power or the inclination to advertise the offsprings of his own brain,—indeed he displayed considerable skill in acting as his own press-agent during a period when that talent was not so highly developed or so audaciously flaunted as it is to-day. But he was not the morbid and insatiable egotist in his writings that Byron was; nor was his personality reflected in those writings so obtrusively as Shelley's was reflected in his. Every page of Poe's imaginative poems is stamped with the peculiarities of his genius as an author,—at the same time, there is no flagrant thrusting forward of self, as we observe in nearly every important work of Byron. His self-portraiture to a conscious degree is not projected beyond a bare suggestion in the background of the "Raven," "Annabel Lee," and "Ulalume." These poems disclose, in a spectral way, his personal loss,—the wound which fate has inflicted on his spirit,—but there is no echo there of Byronic introspection, nor even of Shelleyan revolt. In the imaginative prose works, on the other hand, there is a distinct personality which very often rises to view; but there is no reason to think that Poe in his own mind identified himself with this figure; which, as a matter of fact, he only in one or two particulars resembled. That figure is the figure of a man who, suffering from some fatal though unacknowledged distemper, and indulging in noxious drugs, "is given to musing over old books in an antiquated and gloomy chamber, and is reserved for a horrible experience."

Poe does not attribute to this sombre personality,—which is possibly the set shadow of himself,—those rebellious opinions,

those insurgent sentiments, which form the very core of Byron's and Shelley's self-revelations.

There was one quality which, at long intervals, and spasmodically, as it were, he did share with Byron,—a quality that had the flavor in some degree of the abnormal self-consciousness which distinguished that great poet. "Fame," he exclaimed with undisguised moroseness on one occasion, "forms no motive power with me. What care I for the judgment of a multitude, every individual of which I despise!" These words, which were wrung from him in private conversation, reflect with the most poignant fidelity the bitterness of his feelings in pondering over the disappointments and miscarriages of his life. There was, at the moment at least, no kink of affectation in his mind, no histrionic attitude of self-contemplation, such as makes us doubt the sincerity of the same sentiments as uttered by Byron. Byron was an outcast of fashionable English drawing-rooms, and his proclamation of contempt for mankind simply voiced the writhings of an unmanly vanity deeply wounded by the derisive finger pointed at him by the most fickle coterie of London.

Poe, on the other hand, had swallowed to the last drop the contents of the most poisonous cups which can be raised to human lips,—he had lost the young and lovely wife to whom he was devoted; he had combatted in vain the slings and arrows of the most extreme penury; he was sinking under the secret but steady encroachments of disease. There was nothing in life to afford him gratification or solace except the exercise of his incomparable art. And in the privacy of his own breast he was too full of that art really to despise fame for any length of time. In his exasperated moments, he himself confessed this. "I love fame," he exclaimed on one occasion, while in this more natural mood. "I dote on it. I idolize it. I would drink to the dregs the glorious intoxication. I would have incense ascend in my honor from every hill and hamlet, from every town and city on this earth. Fame! Glory!—they are life-giving breath and living blood. No man lives unless he is famous. How utterly I belied my nature and aspirations when I said I did not desire fame and that I despised it!"

In these passionate words,—words that have an echo of wildness,—the man expressed the permanent sentiments of his heart. Was it not to be expected that one who, from a cold, hard, worldly, and practical point of view, had made a pitiful failure of life,—who, being penniless, had no claim whatever to consideration judged by the standards of the hucksters and money-changers,—should almost feverishly exaggerate the value of his own reputation as a great writer? Fame was no small compensation for the harsh buffetings of fate to a spirit always so acutely sensitive, and often so morbidly despondent.

But love of fame with Poe had its origin, partly at least, in another feeling. There was a boyish side to his disposition up to the very last hour. We say boyish, for is not the desire to be celebrated,—to be talked about admiringly by all sorts and conditions of men,—an infirmity of youth, a weakness of that restless, unphilosophical period of life which is so much inclined to attach an inordinate importance to so many things, which, at a riper age, are justly thought to be hollow and worthless after all?

In the time in which the poet lived, there was, proportionately to the number of persons embraced in the higher classes, a larger circle who valued naked fame as a test of success in life than there is now, when pecuniary standards are so arrogantly applied as the only correct method of weighing the achievements of a career. There were not at that period the same extraordinary opportunities of accumulating fortunes; nor had vast estates been heaped up by myriads of speculators to dazzle the eyes of men, pervert and confuse their nobler judgment, and stimulate their meaner instincts. A burning emulousness in the race for fame, to be won by pure and simple intellectuality, was then far more common. There was then a love of distinction for its own sake,—not for the sake of what it would return in a material way. We perceive the existence of this spirit, not only in many of the most meritorious writers of those times, but also in many of the most accomplished lawyers and statesmen. For the eminent to die poor, or to leave small properties, was the rule, and not the exception; and this fact was not looked upon as reacting to the discredit of their memories. The commonwealth, being then young, was animated by less worldly standards

of value. The quarrelsome, disparaging attitude which Poe detected in the petty literary coteries of his day and so mercilessly scourged, may have had its origin in some degree in this spirit of rivalry, which in the impotent who are also aspiring always degenerates into mean jealousies and coarse intolerance.

There was another characteristic of young and provincial America, however, which Poe did not share, and that fact has been used against him without scruple by one set of his detractors. Griswold decried the value of his imaginative works on the ground that they were entirely "devoid of conscience"; and a later critic from New England, unbiased by Griswold's personal feeling, but equally puritanic in his outlook, disparages the same works because they cannot be said to promote the growth of the moral utilities.

From the point of view of these two writers it was the highest good fortune of the literary world of America, during that period of its history, that it was controlled, not only by the polished standards as to style, but also, and above all, by the ethical views, of the New England School. It is not unjust to this School to say,—indeed, this School, perhaps not inappropriately, claimed it as its greatest distinction,—that it was dominated by those Puritan ideals which made Art the plodding coach-horse of Morality, and which looked upon it as serving its only true object in thus quickening the moral progress of mankind. Reduced to their last analysis, those ideals signified that Longfellow's *Psalm of Life* attained to a far higher platform than Poe's *Haunted Palace*, and, therefore, it was essentially the greater poem of the two. The one was a perfect moral homily, and whether faithful to the canons of Art in expression or not, it was superior to verse which made no pretense whatever to convey any sort of moral homily, though admitted to have reached the loftiest region of Art in expression.

Griswold, in condemning Poe's works because they were so plainly devoid of a moral purpose, declared that "conscience is the parent of whatever is absolutely and unquestionably beautiful in Art as well as in Conduct." Now this admirable deliverance would have sounded very much more congruous in the mouth of a Longfellow or a Whittier,—men whose personal and literary

lives illustrated the beauty of so fine a sentiment,—than in the mouth of the author of the most libelous of all memoirs. There is a decided reminiscence of Griswold's former cloth about the words, an echo distinctly suggestive of a revived clerical unctuousness; but there can be no doubt whatever that, in thus confidently publishing his dictum, he reflected with fidelity the conclusion of our greatest single school of writers, who candidly and honestly entertained that sentiment. Probably, nowhere would such an exclusive, such a sweeping opinion have been proclaimed so emphatically as in a provincial community, which is always more unanimous in upholding its ideals and always surer of their correctness than one distinguished for greater diversity of interests and sentiments, and from longer experience and riper culture disposed to regard all generalizations with more or less caution and distrust.

From an historical point of view at least, there are no immutable standards of conscience of the sort which Griswold had in mind in disparaging Poe. Have not most ethical criterions undergone very great modification from age to age in the general course of the centuries? The moral tests of the Babylonian did not resemble those of the Egyptian; those of the Egyptian did not resemble those of the Grecian and Roman; while the moral tests of the mediæval Italian are far from recalling those of the modern Englishman and American. The purely moral codes of the great ethical exemplars of recorded time indeed were based upon dissimilar interpretations of what really constitutes the true conscience. But throughout the vast reach of the centuries, stretching from the remotest Assyrian Empire to our own era, has not the sense of the beautiful always existed? Different standards of beauty undoubtedly prevailed in different ages so far as they applied to Art, but it is quite probable that the emotion of the Babylonian looking at a sunset from his hanging garden was as acutely pleasurable as that of the Greek gazing at the same phenomenon in the western sky from the peak of the Acropolis, or of the Englishman, from Richmond Hill; or of the American, from the terrace of the Capitol at Washington. All had the same titillation of beauty, although the capacity to express it may have varied.

The most beautiful objects of nature, at least,—the sky, the ocean, the mountain,—must have made the same impression on the cultivated pagan as they did on the refined Christian, although their respective views of human slavery, polygamy, and suicide, may have been repugnant in the extreme. The hues of the gorgeous flower, the tints of the fresh sea-shell, and the plumage of the tropical bird, must have excited the admiration of all men in all ages who advanced the smallest pretensions to civilization.

Griswold, in asserting that Poe's writings were devoid of what the Puritan, with his austere ideals, pronounced a conscience,—a sense of moral utility, which, lofty as it is in its finest manifestations, so often passes into the region of falsehood and hypocrisy,—stated what was exactly true. Poe was a Greek in his view of his art; there was not only an after-smack of Helicon in the mere verbal expression of his genius, but there was something essentially Hellenic in his whole literary temper. In failing to breathe into his pages the spirit of the Puritan conscience, and in suffusing those pages, for a substitute, with the spirit that springs from the worship of pure beauty, he was perhaps assuring for himself at least a little of the fame which has, in the case of the Greek classics, survived all those mutations and shiftings which, since their times, have taken place in mankind's code of ethics; and which promises still to survive when the last volume of the literature of the Puritan conscience,—not even excepting Milton's *Paradise Lost*,—shall have been consigned to the unvisited shelves of mouldering oblivion.

Poe concentrated his gaze upon those physical and spiritual phenomena of beauty which take no more cognizance of a thousand years than they do of one year. As long as men shall retain any knowledge of the language in which his works are written, so long is it probable that those works will continue to be read and admired, simply because, in their essence, they are true to nature, the one thing that will survive all human systems, all codes of ethics, since it alone is as eternal as the hand of God who framed it.

It is one of the most remarkable antitheses of his life,—and was there ever a life which had antitheses more remarkable?—

that a person whose whole existence after arriving at manhood was steeped to the very core in poverty and its contaminating sordidness, and whose infirmity of will so often placed him in situations apparently so destructive of all æsthetic delicacy and refinement, should, nevertheless, never have lost even partially his extreme susceptibility to whatever was fairest in Art and Nature. The contrast between this perfervid worshipper of beauty, with his head touched by a brilliant ray from the Empyrean, and the man so often dragged through the mire by his own weakness, was impressive and dramatic enough, without the darkness of the real picture being further blackened in a spirit of wanton malignity. There is in all literature no instance of greater fidelity, not one of more adamant loyalty, to æsthetic ideals than was presented in the literary life of Poe. This adoration of beauty in all its varied forms was his finest characteristic. It may even be said that it was his only religion, although he died with an invocation for Heaven's mercy on his lips.

Again and again he referred to that "divine sixth sense,—the sentiment of the beautiful which is yet so faintly understood. . . . That sense which speaks of God through his purest, if not his sole, attribute, which proves, and alone proves, his existence."

It was not the small voice of conscience which, as Griswold would have it, demonstrated in Poe's opinion the Deity's existence; it was the existence of the beautiful; and therefore in worshipping the beautiful,—in burning incense on the altar of the highest æsthetic ideals,—he felt that he was showing the noblest kind of reverence for the Creator of all things. Borne up to the loftiest atmosphere of his art on the wings, as it were, of this glorious monomania, he seemed almost to realize the extravagant description of Graham, who said: "He longed to bathe his soul in the dreams of seraphs. . . . He was of a fine essence that moved in an atmosphere of spirits." Inevitably and irresistibly such a man exhibited the powers of a poet just as soon as he was old enough to cast his thoughts and fancies into a rhythmical shape; and naturally enough he early formulated a theory as to his art in harmony with his intense devotion to his con-

ception of beauty. "Readers do exist, and always will exist," he wrote, "who, to hearts of maddening fervor, unite in perfection the sentiment of the beautiful. To readers such as these, and only such as these, must be left the decision of what the true poetry is; and these, with no hesitation, will decide that the origin of poetry lies in a thirst for a wider beauty than earth supplies,—that poetry itself is the imperfect effort to quench the immortal thirst by novel combinations of beautiful forms; and that this thirst, when even partially allayed, produces emotions to which all other human emotions are vapid and insignificant."

"Beyond the limits of beauty," he declared, "the province of poetry does not extend. Its sole arbiter is taste. With the intellect or with the conscience it has only collateral relations. It has no dependence, unless incidentally, upon either duty or truth."

In his review of Longfellow's ballads, he propounded his now famous theory that "beauty only should be the theme of art. If truth was its chief object, the highest aim of art, then Jan Steen was a greater artist than Angelo; Crabbe a nobler poet than Milton."

Had the theory thus expressed not shaped and deeply colored all his own verse, its origin might, in some measure, have been attributed to his detestation of the New England School. There could hardly have been employed by him a more destructive method of disparaging that School. But no room for doubt exists that this theory as to poetry was one of the most impersonal and independent convictions of his life; and that his dislike of the New England writers as a body was not the cause, but the result of this theory; although it is possible that a sense of sectional antipathy may have unconsciously tinted his opinion of that circle of writers.

Who were the poets who most profoundly influenced his taste? Keats, Shelley, and Tennyson preëminently, and, in a hardly less degree, Coleridge. "These," he said, "with a few others of like thought and experience, I regard as the sole poets." But the most remarkable of them all, in his opinion, was Keats. "Beauty," he asserted, "was always the aim of that poet."

Why was it that Poe's sense of beauty was, in its most characteristic aspects, almost always associated with death and ruin? "Of all melancholy topics, what, according to the universal understanding of mankind, is the most melancholy?" he asks. "Death, is the obvious reply. And when is this most melancholy of topics most poetical? When it most closely allies itself to beauty,—the death of a beautiful woman is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world."

Could there be a more convincing proof of the entire absence of voluptuousness in his genius? His sense of beauty, so far as the opposite sex was concerned, was touched most fully, not by the living woman, but by the dead,—it was not the physical but the spiritual in her which fascinated his mental eye. No other poet ever presented woman in a light quite so ethereal. Not only is the earthly side completely overlooked, but even the feminine seems ignored,—except so far as it assumes a form as impalpable as a moonbeam, or as elusive as a whiff of vanishing steam. Those who are inclined to take a disparaging view of the moral aspects of Poe's life will search in vain through his imaginative works for a single sentence that is suggestive of prurency, indelicacy, impiety, or any other quality that indicates moral corruption and degeneracy. The wild revolt of his fellow lyricist, Shelley, against all conventions, all laws, all customs, however consecrated by the sympathies and associations of unnumbered generations of men, was not reflected in the pages of the American poet; nor was the languishing, voluptuous spirit of Keats mirrored there; nor the satanic, restless, outrageous spirit of Byron.

Poe's imaginative works have all the moral reserve and purity of Tennyson's, without any suggestion of those commonplace domestic virtues, of that rigid conventionality, to which the laureate never failed to bow in homage even in his most fervid moments. Having an abnormal susceptibility to impressions of beauty, it followed that he was not devoid of that sensuousness which takes the form of a dreamy appreciation of the magnificent, the gorgeous, the splendid. He was always quick to observe anything of a nature to appeal to artistic sensitiveness. "During my first call at your house," he wrote Mrs. Shew, "I noticed

with so much pleasure the large painting over the piano, which is a masterpiece indeed; and I noticed the size of all your paintings, the scrolls indeed of set figures of the drawing room carpet, the soft effects of the window shades, also the crimson and the gold. . . . I was charmed to see the piano and the harp uncovered. The features of Raphael and the Cavalier, I shall never forget,—their softness and beauty.”

Full of this fine emotion about things which must have derived their principal charm from his own imagination,—for Mrs. Shew’s drawing-room could hardly have presented a scene of extraordinary elegance and beauty,—what would not his sensations as a poet have been could he have gazed at the fretted façades and the emblazoned windows of the Old-World cathedrals; or strolled through the decorated galleries of the Pitti Palace and the Louvre; or from the bridges over the Arno at Florence watched the sun rise from behind the crest of the Apennines; or from the Lido at Venice seen it set behind the Euganean Hills; or beheld the Rhine rolling between its castellated crags; or from Cooper’s Hill looked down upon Windsor’s gray turrets and the silver thread of the Thames winding through its meads and cornfields!

But Poe’s genius did not exhibit itself exclusively in conceptions about which the light of a spectral or ethereal sensuousness seems to play. There is in his imaginative prose an accuracy almost mathematical in its precision, a marvellous copiousness of detail, great subtlety, great acuteness of reasoning power, extraordinary capacity for analysis. This is the more remarkable in one who could correctly say of himself that “to dream had been the business of his life.”

In one set of his tales, imagination predominates; in the other, a clear, penetrating intellect. But original as all are,—supremely artistic as are the greatest,—it is a cause for regret that he should not, like Tennyson, have poured out his whole genius on poetry. The literature of the world to-day would be the richer if, discarding his untenable theory that all poems should be short, he had embodied in undying verse at length such prose masterpieces as *Ligeia*, *Eleonora*, and the *Fall of the House of Usher*. With him, poetry, as he himself said, was a passion.

Had it been his only literary passion,—had it absorbed all his thoughts and bounded all his efforts as a writer,—he would have made, by the exercise of his pen, not relentless enemies, but faithful friends; and, in consequence, his primacy among American authors would long ago have been acknowledged by his countrymen as universally as it was, almost from the outset of his career, acknowledged by foreign nations.

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